

PROVERB AS DETERMINANT OF CULTURAL IDENTITY: THE IMPERATIVE OF THE THREE REGIONAL LANGUAGES IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines cultural identity through proverbs especially, by comparing and contrasting proverbs in Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. Cultural background of the three regional languages in Nigeria will be explored by analysing verbal expressions in their respective native languages. Elements such as word choice, imagery and tone will be revealing factors of traditions, values, and cultural traits. The significance of this study lies in the fact that national identities can be better understood by the comparison and contrast of these popular expressions. It was discovered that proverbs bring out the uniqueness of a people and also teach tolerance, honesty, hard work and sense of self-worth among Nigerian people. It is recommended that the study of proverbs should be given prominence in the curriculum of studies for schools and universities in Nigeria because Proverbs can unite the country and make Nigeria a peaceful nation.

KEYWORDS: Culture, Cultural Identity, Identity, Proverbs, Language

INTRODUCTION

Series of popular wisdom abound in many African languages to accentuate and highlight discourses at given contexts. These expressions of wisdom are usually referred to as proverbs. In Africa, especially in the Nigerian context, expressions are not considered rich and intelligent except when they are duly laced with proverbs, which are many in our diversified cultures. This informs why a traditional African would constantly punctuate his speech with appropriate proverbs and aphorisms to drive his points home [Lawal, (1992) cited in Lawal, et al. (1997:637)]. The ability to sum up ideas and experiences in captivating and succinct expressions has always been considered a sign of native intelligence, linguistic competence and cultural erudition.

Proverbs are wise sayings that address the heart of the discourse in any given context, truthfully and objectively. In Africa and in Nigerian cultures especially, they are considered the reliable means, which convey meanings to their destinations or hearts of the listeners. According to the BBC English Dictionary (1992:924), proverbs are short sentences that people often quote to give advice or make general comments about life. A proverb is therefore, a short well-known expression that states a general truth and gives an advice. Whiting (1932:302), having read through and scrutinized the various attempts by other scholars to give a more precise definition of a proverb which was however an exercise in futility, he resorts to sum up what is contained in these different definitions and give a more all embracing definition as an expression that, owing to the people, testifies to its origin in form and phrase.

It expresses what is fundamentally true (truism), in a homely language often adorned, however, with alliteration and rhyme, he writes. He goes on to say it is usually short, but need not be; it is usually true, but need not be. Some proverbs have both a literal and a figurative meaning, either of which makes perfect sense, but more often they have

but one of the two. A proverb must be venerable; it must be the sign of antiquity, and since such signs may be counterfeited by a clever literal human being, it should be attested in different places at different times.

According to Trench (1905:10), no matter how fulfilling a saying may be, it cannot just be esteemed as a proverb. For a saying to be regarded as a proverb it should be in use for quite a time and the language in use should be expressing some meaning hidden or shadowed by the literal meaning of those words as they appear on surface with the superficial value.

The use of proverbs is common among Nigerian writers. Thus, in projecting the Nigerianness of their themes and cultural backgrounds, the Nigerian writers articulate the rich cultural ethos of proverbs in their creative works to reinforce meanings. It is ultimately submitted that proverbs are a profound source of rhetorical power, literary effectiveness and discourse maturity.

It has been argued that one of the most interesting and perhaps difficult parts of language learning is exploring the sayings and expressions that are a part of every language. Proverbs and idioms, then, play a key role in language studies. A proverb is defined as a short pithy saying in frequent and widespread use that expresses a basic truth or practical precept. An example in English is “All that glitters is not gold” meaning that some things are not as valuable as they appear to be. An idiom or idiomatic expression is defined as common phrases or sayings whose meanings cannot be understood by the individual words or elements. An example in English is “Forty winks” which means a short nap, and has nothing to do, in reality, with winking forty times.

Proverbs alongside idiomatic expressions, colloquialisms, slang can motivate language students in their learning process because these expressions are colourful and often very different from the standard language. They can make students feel as if they are learning more than just the basic vocabulary of the language. In addition, proverbs and sayings can be an insight into the culture and the society of the country they originate from or are used in (Beacco 138). One can even say that they make up a part of intercultural communication, which has been defined as verbal and nonverbal communication that exists between the members of different cultures (Abdallah-Preteille 102-103). When sayings, expressions and proverbs are used by a native speaker, in essence they can actually have the function of giving practical instruction of the language and its culture (Zuluaga).

In many African societies effective speech and social success depend on a good command of proverbs. These treasured sayings convey the demonstrated wisdom of the ages and therefore serve as a reliable authority in arguments or discussion. Proverbs are a universal phenomenon. What differs from one culture to the other is the meaning that is attached to proverbs. Hence, ‘proverb must be analysed in each of its unique social contexts. In other words, “the proverbs of a community or nation is in a real sense an ethnography of the people which if systematized can give a penetrating picture of the people’s way of life, their philosophy, their criticism of life, moral truths and social values 4. And in Africa, proverbs ‘have a different function and level of theoretical meaning that make them key components, as well as expressions of a culture’s viewpoints on a variety of important topics and problems.

Nigerian Proverbs as Symbolic Expressions and Communications

Nigerian proverbs are as numerous and different as Nigerian languages are overwhelmingly numerous. Heine and Nurse (2000:96) in the 1996 edition of *Ethnologue* put the number of living languages in Africa at 2011 and list the total number of living languages in the world as 6500; while they list 515 for Nigeria. The proverbs, especially those from Southern Nigeria are effective means of communication, as they exploit the resources of metaphor, hyperbole, similes, among other striking artistic forms. They have graphic qualities with which they spice speech. Chinua Achebe extols this

aspect of the Nigerian proverb when he remarked that among the Igbos, proverbs are the “palm oil with which words are eaten.” He imagines and invents a situation where words are put in the mouth like pieces of yams and chewed, after dipping the yam (word) in palm oil.

PROVERBS: A CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Proverbs are common features of conversational eloquence in many African cultures, especially in Nigeria. Such “wise sayings” are usually acquired and learnt from listening to the elders’ talk. Given the vintage position that the elders occupy in various African traditions as the human repository of communal or primordial wisdom, they are the masters of eloquence, rhetorics and meaning. They are the ones who know how to impregnate short expressions with vast meanings, implicating the proverb, “it is the elder’s mouth that determines a ripe kola nut”.

Several definitions of the term “proverb” abound in literature. The central idea in the definitions is that a proverb is “an adage, saying, maxim, precept, saw or any synonym of such that expresses conventional truth”. According to *Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (1972), a proverb is a “short saying in common use expressing a well-known truth or common fact ascertained by experience”. It is our contention, based on above definitions, that a proverb is any wise saying or epigram that addresses the heart of the matter in a given context, truthfully and objectively, and is ascertained by world knowledge.

Adegbija (1988) provides insights into factors responsible for the successful decoding of meanings by investigating the utterance, “My friend, where is Anini?” made by a Nigerian military President to his Inspector General of Police. He discovers that the utterance subjects itself to five interpretations (Adegbija, 1988:153) based on thirteen different presuppositions, both semantic and pragmatic. Those presuppositions made his subjects infer ten meanings from the utterance under study, which surreptitiously appears as an innocuous utterance (Ibid:158), contextualized naturally within the semantic and pragmatic frameworks.

Lawal et al. (1997:635-652) describe the illocutionary acts performed through the use of twelve Yoruba proverbs. They analyse the linguistic, situational, psychological, social, sociological and cosmological contexts which listeners or readers have to competently deploy to interpret the proverbs. They dissect the frontiers of meanings inherent in the proverbs through the pragmatic theory, which is a theory of meaning. Pragmatics is mainly concerned with the different meanings which words, phrases and sentences can have in different contexts of use (Lawal, 1997:19).

Alabi (2000:215-230) highlights the form and functions of proverbs in five plays of Olu Obafemi. The three groups she identifies are, first, proverbs that echo existing Yoruba proverbs, which aim at freshness, reducing the boredom of encountering everyday proverbs. The second group consists of proverbs that are garnished by rhetorical elements such as unusual collocates, L1 lexemes, parallel structures, anastrophe, parenthesis and ellipsis which serve the function of engaging the minds of the audience/readers in the intellectual tasks of identifying new versus old forms of the proverbs. The last group comprises proverbs that sparkle in translation “with the vivid imagery of the L1 and its culture” which functionally provide the necessary cultural milieu for the plays she studied.

Following Lawal’s (1992) thesis that proverbs seem to contain the richest pool of pragmatic or semantic factors, the meaning mappings provided by proverbs are therefore significant for attention especially in the second language context, where the L1 ideas are transposed on the L2 codes. Though, due to the universality of human experience, proverbs exist in all languages with similarities in terms of their reliance on vivid images, domestic allusions and word play, yet they are scantily encountered in many European languages (Crystal, 1997:53). On the contrary, proverbs feature prominently in interpersonal, transactional and ideational language use in Africa. And since African writers articulate African ethos that

“enable a compelling realization of African aesthetics”, Nigerian writers are wont to suffuse their committed literary enterprises with abundant proverbs as a way of underscoring cultural consciousness and evoking penetrating meanings.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Language is one of the main instruments by which values, belief systems and cultural practices are communicated. Every language, asserts Goddard (1998:2), has its own culture-specific meanings, which do not translate readily into English. For this purpose, the Nigerian writers in English have to intuitively deploy theories of meaning to their rendition of Yoruba proverbs into English and have to rely on this to get their meanings communicated. As semantics is a linguistic theory concerned with the study of meaning by seeking “to convey and classify human experience through language” (Babatunde, 1999:70) and pragmatics studies the “‘invisible’ meaning or how we recognize what is meant even when it isn’t actually said (or written)” (Yule, 1996a:127), the essence of the theories of meaning is to provide frameworks from which meaning can be attributed and inferred. Some of the theories of word/sentences meaning include the Referential Theory, the Ideational Theory, the Stimulus-Response Theory, the Realist Theory and the Contextual Theory. In this context we will only consider the referential theory and the contextual theory.

The Referential Theory states that the meaning of a linguistic expression is expressed in terms of what is named, denoted and referred to by the word. Also considered as the denotation theory, it indicates that the meaning of a word or expression is the physical object is which the word stands for.

The contextual theory, on the last note here, is a pragmatic theory of meaning which focuses on what the linguistic form is used for, rather than what it means (Oyeshile, 2000:176). According to Firth, who is a proponent of this theory, the most vital fact about language is its social function. Essentially, the theory maintains that at a word/sentence will be meaningful only if it is used appropriately in some actual contexts (Ogunsiji 2000:48).

Moreover, as meaning cannot be a one dimensional phenomenon, there are bound to be types of meanings. Leech (1974) identifies seven types of meaning so as to really delineate the nature of the elusive meaning. According to him, meanings are conceptual/denotative, emotional/connotative, collocative, reflected, affective, stylistic and thematic. As all these meaning types feature in proverbs, a brief discussion of them is deemed appropriate.

Denotative meaning is the literal, basic, plain or central meaning of a word. It is relatively stable and its scope is not open-ended and indeterminate. Connotative meaning, on the other hand, is the meaning people associate with words. It is the personal or cultural meaning which is open-ended and indeterminate. According to Odebunmi (2001:49), connotative meaning ultimately depends on “individual experience” and Yule (1996b:3) affirms the essence of “speaker meaning”.

While collective (from collocation or “placing together” of words or phrases) meaning is the meaning of a linguistic form in relation to the other forms expressed with it in a given context, reflected meaning is the sense a word or sentence evokes in a multiple conceptual situation. In the words of Ogunsiji (2000:52), reflected meaning arises when one of the several meanings of a word becomes directly associated with the word to the extent that we tend to forget the other uses of the word.

Affective meaning arises when language is used to reflect the personal feelings or attitudes of the speaker to the audience. This type of meaning features at the levels of politeness, indignation and rudeness. While stylistic meaning concerns the relation of the linguistic form to social or situational circumstances like geographical location, subject-matter, medium, sex, age, etc, thematic meaning refers to the manner of organising messages in terms of ordering, focus and

emphasis. No language is monolithic and expressions lend themselves to various meanings based on the interpretation of the listeners, stamping one specific meaning on a proverb may be erroneous. What we have, rather, are possible meaning types which cannot even all be explored. The inter-relationship and inter-dependence of meanings, occasioning overlaps, thus feature in our analysis.

Aesthetically speaking, a proverb may be used to show joy, to mourn, to praise, to indicate failure or to warn. So, apart from the literal and linguistic contexts, the social context of any proverb determines its suitability of use in a particular situation (Bashir and Idris-Amali, 2012:495). The meaning of a proverb, to a great extent, depends on the circumstance of use, the dexterity of the speaker (user), the iconic cultural and interpretative skills of the listener (audience), among other linguistic tropes which embody its aesthetics. Suru (2010:171) affirms that aesthetics deals with those responses to natural objects (including proverbs) and the judgement of them whether they should be regarded as beautiful or ugly. Omoera (2012: 66), though in a slightly different context, argues that what we see/say/hear has 'colour' or 'art' attached to it and equally constitutes an aesthetic essence, which is a 'moment' of beauty in both tangible and intangible terms. Here lies the aesthetic bite and relevance of proverbs as artistic embodiments that can engage, provoke, evoke human thoughts/ideas tangibly and intangibly depending on the speaker/listener and native intelligence interfaces. However, the aesthetics as seen in the context of usage of proverbs is of paramount interest to this discourse.

The elements of choice of words and imagery will be revealing factors of traditions, values, or cultural traits of an individual.

Some Examples Hausa Proverbs

A Dubiruwa a Dubitsaki

Literarily- Look at the water, look at the sediment.

Not all that glitters is gold.

Ba Baƙoruwakashalabari

Literarily- welcome a stranger with water and you will get stories/information from him/her.

Give a stranger water and you will gain from him.

Kifi a Ruwasarki Ne

Literarily- A fish is a king in the water.

A man can do what he likes in his own house.

Komezurfinruwa, Da Yashi a Ciki

Literarily-No matter how deep the water is, there's always sand in it.

There is an end to all things.

Sairuwayayiyawa a Kanbadoki

Only when there is plenty water that you give it to a horse.

You only give when you have enough or you don't give what you cannot afford.

Tsohongatarinka, Ya Fi Sari Kabani

What belongs to you is better than borrowing from someone.

The images of sediments (tsaki), folktales, sand, horse, axe(gatari) are common or associated with the Hausa community. One can determine your cultural background from the images you use in your proverbs. And the use of language such as;

- A man can do what he likes in his own house.
- Not all that glitters is gold.
- Give a stranger water and you will gain from him.

Depicts the lifestyle of the Hausas. A man sees himself and rule in his house as a demi-god. The Hausas also have respect for gold and welcoming a visitor or stranger with water is part of Hausa culture.

Yoruba Proverbs

Yoruba: *A kiiraoyikomaakoniloju.*

English: You do not buy wind with money without experiencing storm.

Context of Usage

The deeper meaning underlies that those who stir up trouble suffer the grievous consequences. The proverb serves a social function, as it indirectly admonishes troublemakers to desist from causing problems to other people, or bear the consequences of their action.

The aesthetics of the proverb lies in the images of spending, money, wind and storm. One is expected to spend one's hard earned money on something beneficial. It is unimaginable that one can spend money on wind or nothing and get into trouble.

Yoruba: *Ti ebibakuroninuisse, isebose.*

English: If hunger is out of poverty, poverty is finished.

Context of Usage

It suggests that people should work hard to put food on the table. If this is done, all other problems can be solved. The aesthetics of the proverb lies in the images of hunger, and poverty existing side by side until food is used to break the relationship. Others include;

- Kúmólú 'Bíkòbáń'idiobirinkì í jé 'Kúmólú'

Without a special reason, a woman is never named to mark the death of a family pillar.

- Oláníyonu 'Enitikòríolárí, tí ó so omorèníOláníyonu'

Those who have never experienced wealth or honour, say there is problem in wealth or honour and name their children so)

- Aríléyan 'Bàbáolórùlékanti' ó so omorèníAríléyan, ní'boni óyansí'

An owner of one house who names his child 'takes pride in ownership of many houses', where is his pride?)

- Àsàmú 'Omotíyìò je Àsàmú, kékeréníyìòti se enusámúsámú'

A child that will be sharp, shows it early in his speech.

- Apálará ‘Apál’ará, igbónwóniiyèkan; bí a ò ríenifèhintibíòle lí à ñ rí; bí a kòríenì gbójúlé, a teramóiséenì’

A man’s arms are his relatives, his elbows are his brothers and sisters; if we find no one to lean on, we are like a lazy man; if we find no one to rely on, we apply ourselves to our work.

There is a description that correlates Yorùbá proverbs and names. And just as the description attached to a name helps in fixing the reference of the name, the proverb also helps in unveiling the catalysts that arouse, define and manifest role expectations, aspirations and consciousness of the bearer of the name. This awareness can indeed end some of the root causes of social vices in contemporary Yorùbá society, the severed link between names and proverbs that retard the recognition of the veritable name-proverb relation denies concerning the cultural elements that define and work towards meeting certain socially approved expectations and aspirations in life. Therefore I recommend that the seemingly severed link between proverbs and names should be restored to deliberate cultural reorientation as a way to recoup the erstwhile vibrant virtues and values that would help build and develop a peculiar and virile Yorùbá society, especially in these days of rapid globalisation.

Igbo Proverbs

Igbo: *Egbebelu, ugobelu. Nkesibeyaebenenukwariya.*

English: Let the hawk perch let the eagle perch. The one who says the other should not perch, let his wings break.

Context of Usage

It teaches that people in society should tolerate one another and live in an atmosphere of peace and cordiality. Anyone who breaks this rule will have his/her wings broken. The long arm of the law will come after him/her to discipline him/her. Here lies the aesthetic/moral preachment of this proverb.

Igbo: *Nwanyikuru nu zoagbaegwunweonyenakuruyaegun’ohia.*

English: A young woman who stands on the road to dance has a drummer in the bush.

Context of Usage

At the deeper underlying structural level of meaning the artist indirectly suggests that a woman who says “I can succeed without you” has a secret male friend behind her, so you mind what you do or say to any woman. The beauty of the proverb lies in the act of imagining a woman dancing with reckless abandon on a busy road, without a visible source of music. Others in clued:

- If the lizard of the house doesn't do the thing for which it is known it will be mistaken for a lizard of the farmland.
- Do not be like the little nza bird that ate and drank and challenged his personal god to a single combat.
- No matter how strong or great a man is he would never challenge his god.
- The man who carries the deity is not a king.
- The world is like a mask dancing, if you want to see it well, you do not stand in one place.
- An animal more powerful than nte was caught in nte's trap.
- The eneke-nti-oba, when asked by his friends why he was always on wing said, ‘Man of today has learnt to shoot without missing and I have learnt to fly without perching’.

- He who eats palm kernels in the morning understands the language of famine.
- Preparing coco-yams for planting does not mean that they are already planted.
- If you see an udala fruit beside a mould of shit, pluck a leaf and cover the shit, and take your fruit.

The images of lizard, farmland, mask, deity, trap palm kernel etc are common or associated with the igbo community. One can determine your cultural background from the images you use in your proverbs. And the use of language such as;

- If the lizard of the house doesn't do the thing for which it is known it will be mistaken for a lizard of the farmland.
- Do not be like the little nza bird that ate and drank and challenged his personal god to a single combat.
- The man who carries the deity is not a king.
- The world is like a mask dancing, if you want to see it well, you do not stand in one place.
- An animal more powerful than nte was caught in nte's trap.

Depicts the lifestyle or the activities of the Igbo people. They engage in farming, setting of traps, engage in the worship of smaller gods etc. so anyone applying such diction can be concluded as an Igbo man or woman.

A speech in a clan-meeting is customarily comprised of an opening salutation, an elaborate introduction of the topic of discussion, as killed persuasion of the viewpoint taken by the speaker, a conclusive statement and a closing salutation. The entire speech remains rife with appropriate proverbs that both display the wisdom and demonstrative capacity of the speaker. Compared to the aged people of the clan, however, the young men show much ineptitude in handling rhetoric. Being still learners “to speak in riddles” (65), they are more direct and rash in communication. As the narrative puts it, “the language of the young men is always *pull down and destroy*; but an old man speaks of conciliation”(189).

Where do slang, colloquialisms, idiomatic expressions and proverbs come from or how did they originate? The obvious answer is that they come from the culture itself. Proverbs, for example state “basic principles of folk wisdom” of a given culture (Collis, Risso ix). It is precisely for this reason that analyzing them can show revealing elements about culture. Idioms and/or sayings come from many different sources including the Bible, well-known authors such as Aesop and Shakespeare, Native-American customs (in the case of the United States), the ancient Greeks and Romans and even from horse racing. Many idiom so we their popularity to the fact that they rhyme, and probably even originated because of this. An example is *Birds of a feather flock together* [Terban, introduction]. Sayings, expressions or phrasal verbs have also been categorized as phrases that contain an operating verb, which is often not the same verb indifferent languages. To illustrate, Jean-Claude Beacco gives us the following example: one asks a question in English, but in French the verb is not “to ask” but rather “poser” (to put). In Spanish one “makes” a question using the verb “hacer”(Beacco 140).

In general, ‘proverbs evolved with the growth and development of the society, it reflects diverse aspects of a people’s culture, beliefs, traditional, social and political institutions, ethics, commerce, health, etc.xxi indeed, proverbs encapsulate the worldview of a people, and serve as means of arousing, defining, manifesting and establishing the expectations, aspirations and consciousness of a people. Kwame Gkeyexxii acknowledges this aspect and says ‘these sayings (proverbs) contain some thoughts, which...expressed in words, (and which) all who are of that people, recognize at once as something which they knew full well already, which all the instinct of their lives and thoughts and traditions tells them to be true to their own nature’

CONCLUSIONS

The origins of some of these sayings turn out to be quite colourful or revealing expanding then the view of a culture. The differences in lexicon, comparing and contrasting the words used in each language, expose interesting differences in cultural identities. However, as stated at the beginning of this study, even though it is extremely interesting to try and judge a culture or to say how nationalities may or may not act based on the expressions seen in their respective languages, it is probably neither fair nor advisable to do so. People are far too complicated to perceive them as replicas of their language or faithful representative of their culture.

As stated earlier, in Nigeria, not just “among the Ibo, the art of conversation is regarded very highly and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten” (Achebe, 1975:5). Rotimi’s (1979:35) question that “what is the matter, fellow, aren’t you a Yoruba man? Must proverbs be explained to you after they are said?” As a result of this sheer fact, Nigerian writers like Achebe and Rotimi find it desirable and unavoidable to deploy the highly rated proverbs to the articulation of their thematic concerns. The richness of the Nigerian languages and the discursual erudition of elders (who use proverbs most) are not diminished by the fact that the authors write in English. Powerful ideas, illustrative references, and realistic messages are distilled through the use of proverbs in Nigeria. This study is an attempt to emphasise that communication matters a lot and that effective communication in Nigeria requires a good mastery of proverbial elements, which convey more meaning and achieve more results in the hearers’ sensibilities than ordinary everyday expressions. The dynamism of Nigerian languages, their cultural virility and linguistic potency, are underscored by showing through proverbs “how meaning is conveyed by L2”, according to Babatunde (1995:4), “within the mediating role of the first language”.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is on the strength of the foregoing that the following recommendations are made:

- Grants should be made available by stakeholders, including cultural experts, governments and language research centres, for the collection and documentation of Nigerian proverbs to boost the indigenous knowledge base of the people.
- The study of proverbs should be given a place in the curriculum of studies for schools and universities in Nigeria.
- Proverbs that unite the country and make the Nigeria calm should be emphasized.
- Much emphasis should be placed on the proverbs that teach tolerance, honesty, hard work and sense of self-worth.

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